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'American Qur'an' blends US life, Quranic verses

By: GILLIAN FLACCUS**Associated Press****10/07/09 8:25 PM PDT**

CULVER CITY, CALIF. — The scene is seared into the American psyche: the residents of New Orleans engulfed by flood waters, perched on rooftops and desperate for help as corpses float past and helicopters whirl overhead.

The depiction of Hurricane Katrina's devastating aftermath is a visceral image that Americans would expect to find in a history book or on TV — but not in the pages of the Quran, the holy book of the Islamic faith.

That's precisely why painter Sandow Birk chose to include a watercolor of the ravaged city in his latest exhibit "American Qur'an," a re-imagining of the Islamic holy book that pushes cultural and religious boundaries by blending the tome's ancient chapters with postcards from the American experience.

Birk hopes it will help the religious text speak to modern Christians as clearly as Muslims believe God spoke to the Prophet Muhammad so many centuries ago. Many Christians also don't realize that the Quran contains some of the same characters — including Noah, Moses and Abraham — they learned about in Sunday school, he said.

"When you go to a church here, the minister reads a passage from the Bible and then he spends 30 minutes talking about, 'How does this passage relate to your life in the 21st century?' That's a familiar way that Americans have of dealing with religious texts," Birk said. "This is a whole passage about Noah and it's sort of hard to imagine a flood of Noah's epic proportions today — but we can very well remember the flood of Katrina."

In Birk's version, each chapter of the Quran has been carefully copied in English in a calligraphy modeled on the urban graffiti of America's inner cities. The stark black text is bordered by scenes from American life both mundane and extraordinary: gangsters flashing signs, Hurricane Katrina's devastation, migrants working the fields, a crowded airport lounge and a raging California wildfire among them.

Each painting relates to the sura, or chapter, it illustrates, either literally or metaphorically, Birk said.

Birk, an Orange County native who is known for using historical references to address thorny social issues, conceived of the project both as a political statement and an artistic and intellectual challenge. In preparation, he studied for three months at L'Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and pored over ancient, hand-illustrated Qurans of all sizes and styles at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

"We've been engaged in this war for so many years, and it seemed that it would be nice to know more about what's going on between the two cultures, since our country is investing so much into it," Birk said. "The message is very similar. There was sort of this moment where you just think, 'Why is there so much conflict here, because things are so similar?'"

Now, after five years of intermittent work, Birk is halfway done copying and illustrating the Quran's 114 suras. The completed 16-by-24 inch panels are on display until Oct. 30, split evenly between galleries in San Francisco and Culver City, near Los Angeles. A third installation will be shown in New York City this winter before Birk offers the entire collection as a coffee table art book.

Birk, who had a self-described "sparse Christian upbringing," took painstaking care to copy many of the features of centuries-old Qurans, such as the colors, extra-large borders surrounding the holy text and the tiny, multicolored "rosettes" that separate verses and groups of verses on the page.

Yet he has also openly flouted one of the most time-tested traditions surrounding the Quran: a hard-and-fast bias against images of humans or animals within its pages. In contrast, Birk's panels explode with everyday life: a woman jogs through a darkening cityscape, a family gathers around a picnic table, a crowd of iPod-wearing Americans wearily wait at an airport gate and garbage men collect the trash on a gritty urban street.

Birk, 46, believes that because his work does not contain the original Arabic text, it is not considered a "true Quran."

One of his most provocative panels, on display in San Francisco, shows the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, alongside the sura entitled "Smoke." It opens with a Quranic passage about a sign from heaven, a calamitous day when smoke pours forth.

"It was obvious to me that ... if you didn't at some point discuss 9/11 it would just be sort of pointless," Birk said. "It's the crucial moment in the relationship between the two cultures. Any discussion of Islam in the United States has to talk about that."

Because of that content, Koplin Del Rio Gallery owners Sugar Elisa Brown and Eleana Del Rio braced for controversy when the show opened last month. They have been surprised and encouraged by the muted reaction: they have received only a handful of odd or threatening e-mails and some Muslims have written to express their appreciation. Surprisingly, some of the most vocal critics have been those who believe Birk's work portrays Islam in too positive a light, they said.

"We definitely gave it a little more consideration than we would any other show. We're not naive," said Brown. "It really came down to us believing in the work, in Sandow's intent with the work. We're art dealers and what we do is put up work on the walls that we feel has something legitimate to say."

Still, not everyone has appreciated the exhibit, including some Muslim religious leaders who believe the project degrades the Quran. Critic Mohammad Qureshi, administrator of the Islamic Center of Southern California, has refused to visit the gallery or look at pictures of the panels posted on the Internet.

"The Quran is above these things. It doesn't need to be depicted in that way," Qureshi said. "The Quran is accessible the way it is. It's been accessible for 1,400 years, so it doesn't need anything to make it more accessible."

On the Net:

Koplin Del Rio Gallery: <http://www.koplindelrio.com>

Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco <http://www.cclarkgallery.com>

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